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## Brown, THE DIVINE TRINITY

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Divine Trinity*, by **David Brown**. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1985; pp. xvii + 315. \$24.95.

Reviewed by ELEONORE STUMP, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

David Brown's *The Divine Trinity* is an important book which I hope will influence the direction of certain work in contemporary philosophy of religion. It is an attempt to stimulate a dialogue between philosophers of religion and biblical scholars, a dialogue I think is long overdue, in order to combine the studies of the historical basis for and philosophical credibility of Christian doctrines. The doctrine primarily at issue in his book is that of the Trinity, though he also discusses at some length the nature of the Holy Spirit and the doctrine of the Incarnation.

The book is organized into three parts. The first part examines what Brown calls the wider context of the doctrine of the Trinity. Here he takes as his main opponents scholars whom he labels 'deists', those who accept the existence of God but deny that God intervenes in the world. Chapter 1 argues for the advantages of an interventionist view of God. Chapter 2 presents a theory of how such divine intervention might occur, arguing along the way for an understanding of Scripture as a fallible record of a progressive dialogue between God and human beings in which God's nature is increasingly revealed but often enough misunderstood and misreported by Scriptural authors.

The second part of the book is also propaedeutic to its main argument. It attempts to show that there are grounds for Trinitarianism because there are reasons for belief in the Incarnation and in the existence of the Holy Spirit. Brown focuses on two models for the Incarnation, the traditional one (the "Chalcedonian" view) in which the incarnate Christ is one person who simultaneously has both a complete human and a complete divine nature, and a more recent view (the "Kenotic" model) according to which a divine person ceased to have a divine nature and acquired instead a human nature for a certain time, after which he resumed his divine nature. In the succeeding section Brown considers both Christian and non-Christian religious experience to show that there is an element of deity in such experiences which is not comprehended by the conception of God as either of the first two persons of the Trinity but which is captured by the concept of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, in part 3, Brown argues on the basis of his previous discussion for the coherence of a certain theory of the Trinity. He rejects as incoherent the

traditional understanding of the doctrine as held by Augustine and Aquinas and allies himself instead with a view he associates with the Cappadocian Fathers. This view of the Trinity emphasizes the plurality of the divine persons and construes their unity as much broader and looser than numerical identity. It is a view which, as Brown recognizes, comes perilously close to tritheism; and a good part of his defense of the doctrine is an attempt to show that the Cappadocian model is compatible with monotheism.

I found a good deal to disagree with in this rich book. For example, Brown's Kenotic model of the Incarnation does not seem to me coherent; it is not clear to me in what sense a divine person can be said to be the same as the human Jesus because (among other reasons) at the moment Jesus begins to exist (whenever that is) there is neither bodily continuity nor the continuity of character and memories between the divine person and the neonatal or fetal Jesus. The discussion of the traditional view of the Trinity also struck me as highly inadequate. Aquinas's theory of the Trinity, for instance, is dismissed as "total nonsense" (p. 291) after one paragraph of discussion and a one-sentence quotation from Aquinas. And I was not persuaded by Brown's attempts to defend the Cappadocian view of the Trinity from charges of incoherence or tritheism.

But I also found a great deal to admire in the book. Brown's evaluation of contemporary theology pervades the book, and it tends to be insightful and incisive. His criticism in Chapter 3 of Schillebeeckx's approach to the Resurrection is a good case in point. The range of Brown's learning is also very impressive. He moves easily from discussions of the historical conditions surrounding the old Testament exile of the Jews to Wiggins's views on identity. He is familiar with the complexities of Patristic theology and scholastic philosophy and yet clearly is able to address contemporary theology in its own terms. And, most importantly for the overall purpose of his book, he comprehends the historical concerns of a biblical critic, but he is also familiar with the methods and the literature of current philosophy of religion. In consequence, his book is itself an example of the sort of dialogue between biblical exegetes and philosophers Brown is urging; and in my view the importance of his beginning such a dialogue far outweighs his book's flaws.

The present lack of dialogue, Brown points out, gives rise to two problems. On the one hand, he complains, contemporary philosophers of religion tend to ignore "the meaning of the Biblical data" (p. 53) in formulating their arguments, failing to recognize that detailed acquaintance with biblical criticism is crucial for understanding the religion one is attacking or defending. And on the other hand, he maintains, biblical critics and contemporary theologians tend to consider only the historical origin of Christian doctrine and to assume that there is a simple identity between what is historically authentic and what is theologically acceptable. To this essentially correct analysis of the situation it seems to me

imperative to add what will strike any sensitive philosophical reader of Brown's book: biblical critics, including Brown, often enough base their conclusions about historical authenticity on arguments which cannot survive philosophical scrutiny; in fact, what passes for historical reasoning is often barely disguised philosophical or theological speculation based on certain unexamined religious (or irreligious) presuppositions. I want to consider in detail one such case of exegesis in Brown's book in order to show something about the way in which philosophers of religion can contribute to the historical accuracy of biblical criticism as it is currently practiced in secular universities.

Consider, for example, Brown's discussion of the Magnificat. In the last part of Chapter 3 (p. 136) Brown makes this claim: "Earlier in the chapter I gave a reason why the Magnificat is unlikely to be historical; it reflects the victory of the Resurrection." If we turn to the relevant section earlier in the chapter, we find the following argument to support Brown's claim:

"That the birth narratives [concerning Jesus] cannot be accepted as historical *in toto* as they stand would now be all but universally conceded.... To mention but two of the problems, the sentiments of the Magnificat 'are not really the appropriate sentiments of a maiden who has not yet given birth to the Messiah; they are much more appropriate if composed by those who know that through the resurrection God has reversed the crucifixion'..." (p. 124).

In this passage Brown is quoting from the work of a New Testament scholar who has apparently given many reasons for thinking that the birth narratives are not historical. I have nothing to say here about those reasons or that scholar's work. But the reason *Brown* singles out as showing the lack of historicity in the birth narratives seems to me to tell us only something about Brown and nothing at all about their historicity. Because his language is imprecise, it is hard to be definite about his argument, and his conclusion in particular is presented suggestively rather than stated explicitly; but taken in context, his reasoning is apparently something like the following.

- (1) The Magnificat reflects the victory of the Resurrection.
- (2) Sentiments reflecting the victory of the Resurrection are not sentiments appropriate to Mary in the period before the birth of the Messiah.
- (3) They are sentiments particularly appropriate to "those who know that through the resurrection God has reversed the crucifixion".
- (4) Therefore, the Magnificat was composed by "those who know that through the resurrection God has reversed the crucifixion" and not by Mary.

There are three problems with this argument. In the first place, the first premiss seems to me just false. The Magnificat contains no mention of or direct allusion to either victory or resurrection; in fact, as far as I can see, except for the clear references to the female gender of its author, the Magnificat could easily enough pass for one of the Psalms. The closest the Magnificat comes to reflecting the victory of the Resurrection (and it is not very close at all) is in the positive view of God as rejecting the rich and mighty while helping the poor and hungry and in general being an aid and comfort to his people. But such sentiments might have been (and were) uttered by Jews well before the Christian era. Consequently, the sentiments reflected in the Magnificat do not seem to me peculiarly appropriate to post-Easter Christians; and so premiss (3) even if true seems to me irrelevant to the argument's conclusion.

Now if the first premiss of this argument is false, the argument is of course unsound regardless of the truth or falsity of the second premiss. Nonetheless it is worth reflecting on the second premiss for what it shows about the methodology of biblical criticism. The second premiss is vague; but if it is to support the conclusion in (4), then by "not...appropriate to Mary" it must mean something to the effect that (given human nature and the world we live in) Mary could not have uttered sentiments reflecting the victory of the Resurrection. Furthermore, "sentiments reflecting the victory of the Resurrection" is a vague phrase, the meaning of which is not clear. But suppose the strongest interpretation of it and the strongest textual basis supporting it; suppose that in fact there were a line in the Magnificat which said 'the crucifixion will eventuate in a victorious Resurrection', or words to that effect. Would (2) be true in that case? The answer to that question depends entirely on one's religious presuppositions. For atheists or even deists in Brown's sense of the word, the answer is 'yes,' because it is at best extremely improbable that an ordinary human mind would be able to foresee accurately detailed particular events and beliefs of the sort in question. But, of course, if there exists an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good God who sometimes communicates his purposes to his creatures, then the answer is clearly 'no.' Sentiments reflecting the victory of the Resurrection are not appropriate to Mary in that period if she was left to herself; but God might not have left her to herself, and her utterance of such sentiments might reflect something given her by God. Hence, an acceptance of (2) presupposes a denial of the existence of a God of this sort. So Brown's assessment of the historicity of a Christian sacred text is based not on certain historical data but rather on an implicit denial of a central Christian tenet. There is consequently no reason why someone holding traditional Christian beliefs (or anyone else without a warranted belief that such a God does not exist) should take seriously this particular argument against the historicity of the birth narratives. And there is certainly no basis for

thinking of this argument as a *historical* argument or as a historical investigation of the biblical narrative, as Brown seems to do. This is simply a theological argument based largely on a philosophical presupposition which the author neither examines nor justifies.

Finally, something needs to be said about the conclusion. It is not formulated in so many words in Brown's text, but it is strongly suggested in the context. If this is, as it seems to be, the conclusion Brown intends for this argument, then it should be noted that even if all the premisses were above reproach so that Brown *could* support his claim about the non-historicity of the birth narratives, the conclusion in (4) is not validly inferred. At best, what could be derived from these premisses is that the Magnificat was not composed by Mary *in that period of her life*. There is nothing in the premisses to rule out, for example, the possibility that Mary composed the Magnificat later in her life.

Brown is one of the more judicious and sensible contemporary biblical scholars I have read, and certainly he has an extensive acquaintance with contemporary analytic philosophy. And yet biblical exegesis based on specious arguments of the sort just analyzed abound in his book. So, for example, he "is led to doubt whether Jesus ever turned water into wine" in part because "it flies in the face of the type of God revealed elsewhere, where miracles exhibit some deep pastoral concern" (p. 65). Here as in the preceding case we may question his interpretation of the text. Why should we suppose that Jesus had "no deep pastoral concern" in this case? The story in John, after all, concludes by saying that in this miracle Jesus manifested his glory and his disciples believed in him (Jn. 2.11); such a result, if foreknown and intended, does in fact seem to indicate pastoral concern. And, secondly, we may also question the validity of the implicit inference. Even if the miracle at Cana showed no pastoral concerns, why should we believe that all of Jesus' miracles have to be motivated by pastoral concern because most of them are? On anyone's account, Jesus was a person, not a simple programmed machine. Even if virtually all his miracles were motivated by pastoral care, why couldn't he have had an auxiliary motive which operated in a minority of cases, or why couldn't he have acted outside his usual pattern of action? Finally, here too there is an implicit presupposition concerning a religious belief. For if we approach the text with Christian beliefs rather than with atheistic or deistic presuppositions, if we take Jesus to be (somehow or other) divine, we will not automatically suppose that we as finite creatures can clearly know all his motives or can always discern from the narrative what motive was governing one of his historical actions.

No doubt much of the current historical exegesis of the Bible is based on strong historical evidence, clear reasoning, and uncontentious assumptions. But much of it, in Brown's book and elsewhere, is marked by arguments which are invalid, textual interpretations which are at best dubious, and non-historical

philosophical presuppositions which are unexamined and unjustified. The best response philosophers can make to Brown's excellent and learned book is to take up his invitation to a dialogue with biblical critics. In that dialogue philosophers will undoubtedly have a great deal to learn; but they also will have much to teach, and what they have to teach should make a significant difference to biblical scholarship.

*Understanding Identity Statements*, by **Thomas V. Morris**. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1984. Pp. xv and 152. \$23.75, (paper \$16.25).

Reviewed by PHILIP L. QUINN, University of Notre Dame.

This book, the fifth in the series of Scots Philosophical Monographs, discusses the analysis of identity statements in its first five chapters and the epistemic assessment of identity statements in its last four chapters. Identity statements are statements which can be expressed in English by such sentences as the following:

- (1) Phosphorus is Phosphorus
- (2) Hesperus is Phosphorus
- (3) That pain is that neural event

and

- (4) Jesus of Nazareth is God the Son.

What is it that identity statements state? Under what conditions are identity statements warrantably assertable? The chapters devoted to the analysis of identity statements are intended to propose an answer to the first question, and those which concern the assessment of identity statements return an answer to the second. In this brief review, I shall give sketches of both answers, indicate why I find the first answer unsatisfactory, and discuss the application Morris makes of the second answer to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.

Morris prepares the ground for his own analysis of identity statements by trying to undermine two of its prominent rivals; they are the objectual analysis and the metalinguistic analysis. According to the objectual analysis, identity statements state that a certain reflexive relation, self-identity, holds of a single object. Hence, on this analysis, (1) and (2) are standardly used to make the same identity statement. But this renders the proposed analysis very counterintuitive. Because it appears that (1) and (2) differ in informational content and epistemic status, it seems that they are used to make different identity statements. According to the metalinguistic analysis, identity statements state that two actually referring